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# Floating the Escalante River

OR

Pushing, Pulling, Towing, and Portaging  
Your Boat Down the  
Escalante River

This publication was written and printed by:

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior

It is a joint publication of  
the National Park Service and  
the Bureau of Land Management

## The Escalante River

The Escalante River traverses some of the finest canyon country of the Colorado Plateau and offers river-floating enthusiasts the opportunity to enjoy magnificent, wild, redrock canyon scenery. Because it is rugged and remote and sustains only limited flows, the Escalante River provides unique challenges to the river runner.

The deeply entrenched, meandering Escalante River flows between towering cliffs of red and white sandstone decorated with colorful desert varnish. Above the canyons lie rounded sandstone domes, buttes, and slickrock. Along the river are lush riparian ecosystems, providing homes for numerous plants and animals.

The first white men to enter the upper Escalante drainage system were a group of Mormon cavalymen in pursuit of Ute Indians who had been stealing livestock and harassing settlers in southwestern Utah. They initially named the area "Potato Valley" in honor of the wild tubers they found growing in the upper valley. Some of these men returned in 1876 to settle in the area.

In 1872, some of the men with John Wesley Powell's expedition explored the region. Led by Almon H. Thompson, the group decided to name the stream the "Escalante River" in honor of Father Escalante, one of the leaders of the 1776 Dominguez/Escalante Expedition. This expedition proposed to find a trade route from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Monterey, California. Although they did not reach Monterey, they did explore wilderness territory along Colorado's western slope, west to Utah Lake, and south and east to Lees Ferry, eventually returning to Santa Fe. The expedition never actually entered the valley surrounding the present-day town of Escalante, Utah, nor did they see the river, but Thompson named it for Father Escalante anyway.

Harry Aleson and Georgie Clark made the first recorded float trip down the Escalante River in May, 1948. They made the journey in a small Navy surplus neoprene raft, and, according to Harry's journals, the trip was something of an ordeal. It took them seven days to push, pull, portage, tow, and (sometimes) float their way to the Colorado River, but, they felt, the scenery repaid them for their efforts and damaged equipment.

## The Challenge

Even with the right equipment, the Escalante is a marginal river for floating. In years with a good snowpack, the river may be navigable for up to two months during late spring or early summer, but in dry years it may not be floatable at all. An average year will usually provide two or three weeks of runnable flows.

Predicting when the runoff will peak is extremely difficult. According to USGS river gauging data, dating from 1912, the average high water date is May 9th; however the runoff has been known to begin any time from late March to early June, depending on snowpack and spring weather conditions. Consequently, the first challenge is having great flexibility in taking vacation time, the ability to travel on short notice, or amazing luck when planning vacation dates!

**A minimum of six days to complete the trip is recommended.**



## **River Rating**

The Escalante River is a Class II river, but considering its remoteness, potential for severe equipment damage or failure, and limited escape routes, river runners should have at least Class III skills. Although the Escalante is not technically difficult, it requires constant awareness and ability to avoid obstacles, stay in the deepest part of the channel, and navigate tight turns. Boaters are often completely exhausted at the end of their trip.

## **Watercraft**

A narrow, shallow-draft boat is essential for floating the Escalante River. A short craft is desirable considering the many tight turns which will have to be made. Inflatable kayaks have been proven to be the craft best suited for these conditions. Hard-hull kayaks made of ABS or similar material also work well, but fiberglass kayaks may take a severe beating on the many rocks and shallows. Canoes have successfully made the trip, but they require optimum river flows. Canoes, however, are almost too large and unwieldy for the Escalante and are not recommended. Sea kayaks are not recommended, nor are inflatable rafts.

Boat weight is a consideration. Choose a boat which can be easily carried, for at least one, and possibly more, portages will be required. Unless arrangements have been made for a power boat pick-up at Lake Powell, the boater will be faced with a strenuous take-out. Streamflows may drop off suddenly, requiring the river runner to push, tow, or even carry his boat. Therefore, it is best to choose a craft which is light and maneuverable for both the float trip as well as the hike out.

## Access

The best launching point is at the junction of Highway 12 and the Escalante River, 14 miles east of the town of Escalante, Utah. On the south side of the bridge is a temporary, day use only parking area and boat launch. A small overnight parking area and register box are located on the north side of the bridge. This lot becomes easily congested, and river runners are asked to park only a minimum number of vehicles there. The distance from the bridge to Lake Powell is approximately 70 - 75 miles, depending on the current lake level.

The most commonly used take-out point is at the confluence of Coyote Gulch and the Escalante River. The route exits the canyon via Crack-in-the-Wall and provides access to the Forty Mile Ridge trailhead. This is a strenuous hike of 3½ miles with an elevation gain of almost 1,000 feet. The route is not marked, so it is wise to be familiar with the route and to carry a map. Four-wheel drive is sometimes needed to reach the Forty Mile Ridge trailhead, located off the Hole-in-the-Rock road.

A second option is to paddle nearly 25 miles of flatwater from the head of the Escalante Arm downstream to the Hole-in-the-Rock historic site on the main lake channel. The steep, rough trail up to the Hole-in-the-Rock road gains 700 feet in elevation in ⅓ mile and requires scrambling over some boulders and ledges. A rope may be useful. The last five miles of the Hole-in-the-Rock road requires a high-clearance vehicle.

The only way to avoid the strenuous take-out routes at Crack-in-the-Wall or Hole-in-the-Rock is to arrange for a motor boat pick-up on Lake Powell. Currently, the concessioner at Lake Powell does not provide this service, so you must make arrangements yourself.



## River Description

Just upstream from the Highway 12 Escalante River bridge, a staff gauge provides measurement of current river flows. The gauge may be viewed from the launch ramp on the opposite side of the river. A .1 reading indicates that the river flow is barely marginal; a .5 or above reading is considered optimal. A flow lower than .5 means that one will have to spend more time out of the boat, pushing, pulling, and lifting the craft over rocks, sandbars, and riffles. Higher flows create problems in navigating through tight boulder jams and chutes with swift water.

**Highway 12 Put-in to Boulder Creek:** 6 miles. (Please note: all listed river mileages are approximate.) Many small rock fields and gravel bars may result in frequent grounding, especially at lower water levels. Because of the many small bends in the river, the actual mileage may be more than six miles. Remnants of fences are likely to be encountered along this section. At this writing, there were three: one was a single strand of barbed wire; one was the curled-up remains of woven wire; the third was a ¼" cable used for stringing a flood gate. All three can be ducked under, but river runners should watch carefully for these three in addition to any new fences which may be constructed in the future.

**Boulder Creek to The Gulch:** 8.5 miles. The addition of Boulder Creek often doubles the volume of the river, but floating conditions may not necessarily improve for several miles. As its name implies, many volcanic boulders have washed down Boulder Creek from basalt fields at higher elevations. Consequently, fields of small rounded boulders may be encountered and may create obstructions at lower flows. They gradually subside farther downstream.

**The Gulch to Harris Wash:** 12.3 miles. The trip becomes easier through this section, but at lower flows, gravel and sandbars will be apparent. About ¼ mile below The Gulch, just before the river makes a hard left, watch for a spring coming out of the right wall a few feet above river level. This is a handy "drive-by" spring at which one may obtain excellent drinking water. (Keep in mind that it is always wise to boil or filter water before drinking.) At mile 22.8 (about 3 miles downstream from Horse Canyon), the river crosses the boundary into Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. The boundary is not marked. About 3 miles farther downstream, a grazing allotment boundary fence with a flood gate will be encountered. It is easy to push through the flood gate, but a walk-through gate on the right bank is also available. Cattle grazing no longer occurs beyond this fence, and no other fences or remains of fences will be encountered. Horse Canyon and Silver Falls Creek, both entering from the east, offer nice day hikes.

**Harris Wash to Twentyfive Mile Wash:** 11.2 miles. No major difficulties should be encountered in this section, but at lower flows gravel and sandbars and occasional rocks and boulders will keep the river runner busy. Harris Wash, Fence Canyon, Neon Canyon, and Twentyfive Mile Wash all afford exploration possibilities.

**Twentyfive Mile Wash to Scorpion Gulch:** 12.6 miles. Here the canyon walls are higher and narrower. This is perhaps the easiest section of the river to navigate.

**Scorpion Gulch to Coyote Gulch:** 19.8 miles. About ½ mile downstream from Scorpion Gulch is a spring on the right which provides good drinking water. Here, the river has cut down into the softer Chinle formation. Since the Chinle erodes more easily than the harder Wingate sandstone above it, the Wingate formation becomes undercut, and huge blocks collapse and fall. These boulders litter the slopes below and fall into the river, creating boulder jams



and rock fields. It is through this section of the river that inflatable kayaks or other short, durable boats are recommended. Be prepared for an exhausting day!

The first boulder jam occurs about a mile below Scorpion Gulch. Depending on the river flow and river runners' skill level, this jam may be run with a few tight turns. It is best to scout the run beforehand. The boulder jam can be scouted from either the right bank or the left bank, but the right bank is probably best.

For the next 19 miles, the boater must constantly contend with rock fields, tight turns between and around boulders, and gravel beds. Constant attention is required to stay in the deepest part of the channel, elude obstacles, and avoid getting stuck, being swept sideways, swamping, or capsizing. Dry bags and water-tight coolers are a must! One boulder jam about 9.5 miles below Scorpion Gulch must be portaged. There the river funnels through a chute too narrow to run, but the portage on the left is fairly easy.

**Coyote Gulch to Lake Powell:** 0 to 6 miles, depending on the lake level. Due to siltation from high lake levels, the river broadens as it traverses these mud deposits. At low flows, the river becomes braided, and it can be difficult to find a channel deep enough to float in. If this is the case, river runners traveling all the way to the lake may find themselves towing their craft through muddy water and ankle-deep sand. Between Coyote Gulch and Cow Canyon, several springs flow from both sides of the river.

## Final Considerations

Flash flooding can result from heavy rains and thunderstorms. At the first sign of possible flooding, get off the river and ascend to higher ground with all of your equipment. Debris such as rocks and logs, carried by floods, in addition to the high volume of water, can present significant hazards. Flash floods will usually subside in a few hours. Be patient and wait them out.

Stop at the Escalante Interagency Visitor Information Center, along Highway 12 on the west side of the town of Escalante, Utah, to obtain information about current river conditions and emergency exit routes. Exit routes include Harris Wash, Fence Canyon/Egypt, Crack-in-the-Wall, and other longer routes.

Please obtain a free Backcountry Use Permit at the Escalante Interagency Visitor Information Center. These permits help us gather statistics on visitation and provide valuable information should efforts to locate boaters on the river become necessary.

All river runners must have Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices aboard their craft - one for each person. Inflation pump, patch kit, and spare paddle are essential. Helmets are recommended.

Please use low impact camping techniques to help preserve the fragile desert environment. These techniques include selecting campsites with care, using campstoves rather than building fires, proper human waste disposal, and carrying out all trash. River runners are also responsible for their own equipment repairs and must not abandon damaged gear or equipment!

### **For More Information**

Visit the Escalante Interagency Visitor Information Center, located along Highway 12 on the west side of the town of Escalante, or write to the National Park Service, PO Box 511, Escalante, UT 84726 or the Bureau of Land Management, PO Box 225, Escalante, UT 84726. The telephone number is (801)826-5499.

# Map of the Escalante River



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